

7 Suspending disbelief and experiencing the extraordinary

How radical participation may facilitate an understanding of aquatic snakes and fish-tailed beings in southern Africa

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Introduction

A typical feature of cryptozoology, or the study of hidden, secretive creatures (cryptids) not officially recognised by science, is that it is usually only considered seriously by a fringe element of society that draws its evidence from anecdotal sightings of what are assumed to be zoological entities that are physically tangible; their confirmation as a recognised species being dependent on their capture, or their potential for leaving physical remains as evidence, or by independent verification of sightings by a number of sober minded scientists (see Forth, this volume; Walsh and Goldman, this volume). Cryptids are often suspected of being vestiges of species thought to be extinct but have somehow managed to survive human categorisation and domination due to their shy or elusive natures. They are brought to the forefront of public consciousness and imagination when rare, and often brief sightings are claimed by individuals or small groups who happen to be traversing their territories. While public imagination may be stimulated by such claimed sightings (Dendle 2006), serious scientific consideration is usually frowned upon and belief in cryptids tends to be viewed as occupying the realms of psychological fantasy or disorder (Sharps et al. 2010).

The range of creatures falling into the category of cryptids is vast (Eberhart 2002; Newton 2005), and includes those species not officially recognised by science. These may range from species thought to be extinct or unknown, to creatures out of place in that they furtively occupy territories not their own, to mystical and magical shape-shifting creatures that transcend the various orders of reality as we understand them. These different categories require different sorts of analysis and understanding and thus some classification of cryptids is in order. A discussion on classification is not my intention in this paper (see Turner, this volume); my interest, however, is with the last of the categories mentioned, those phantasmagorical and shape-shifting creatures often associated with fantasy, in particular shape-shifting water serpents and their associates, fish-tailed beings or mermaids (see also Schmidt, this

volume). I argue that research tools beyond those typically associated with scientific verification may be required in order to understand claimed human experiences of them – experiences which appear to transcend time and space and form the basis of many religious belief systems. To support my argument I draw from my own experiences of radical participation amongst Nguni-speaking diviner-healers (Zulu = *izangoma/pl*; Xhosa = *amagqirha/pl*) in South Africa, which has allowed me to glimpse the nature of such beings from a different perspective or ‘order of reality’ (Schutz 1974) to that of science, which presently does not have the tools to address such encounters.

Radical participation and the extraordinary

In 1997 I was informed during a divinatory session with a powerful Zulu diviner-healer (*isangoma*), whom I refer to as Baba, that I had a calling to be an *isangoma*. This was my first visit to Baba, whom I hoped to interview regarding the claim that he had been taken by a giant mystical snake (experienced in a trance state) under the sea for three hours off the coast near Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. During the introductory divination he reported that I was connected to the water divinities (the snake/mermaids), whose power resided in a river on the farm on which I grew up as a child in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe (Nyanga), which is located over 1,500 kilometres north of Durban. I subsequently discovered that the area around the farm abounded with reported sightings of mermaids (*njuzu*) and powerful pythons and/or shape shifting snakes. Baba insisted that if I wanted to fully understand the experiences of those who claimed to have such encounters, or of being taken underwater (like he had been), I needed to accept the calling and experience it from the inside. As I had experienced some instances of precognition in the previous year, and certain events had been happening that were challenging my sense of reality, I was ready to suspend my disbelief and engage in what has been termed radical participation and the anthropology of extraordinary experience (Young and Goulet 1994).

I was subsequently initiated as a novice into Baba’s training school, and after having certain ritual inductions performed, which included being given holy water and certain medicines (roots and barks) to drink and purge with, I started to experience occasional very clear and profound dreams. Some of these dreams involved encounters with pythons, large non-aggressive snakes, and fish-tailed beings. I accept that the nature of these dreams, which did not appear to be dose related, could be explained as being induced by either auto-suggestion or the psychoactive properties of the plants administered (see Attala, this volume). These water serpent/mermaid or ‘nixie’ themes have been identified by psychologist Carl Jung as universal archetypal experiences that arise from the collective unconscious (Jung 1968), and the religious historian Mircea Eliade (1991) has also noted these frequently recurring water/serpent/mermaid themes, which are found in a number of different shamanic traditions. Eliade refers to these as ‘aquatic hierophanies’ (see also Bernard 2013) and, as

with other religious symbols, he proposes that they reveal 'certain aspects of reality – the deepest aspects – which defy any other means of knowledge [...] They bring to light the most hidden modalities of being' (Eliade 1991: 12).

While these phyto-induced experiences might serve as supporting evidence for Jungian psychology, or Eliadian symbolist hierophanies, what perplexed me was that the dreams offered details of the geographical location of where these aquatic deities were to be found, none of which I had ever known existed or had been to in physical reality. My task, as instructed by my teacher, was to locate the pools shown in my dreams and to visit them so I could 'show' myself to the divinities and give offerings of thanks for the dream callings I had received.

Discovering the location of these pools, lakes and springs was frequently convoluted and depended on a series of synchronistic events which often took a number of years to unfold; my subsequent discovery of the sites revealed remarkable similarity to the geographical features I had seen in my dreams, as well as some of the people encountered in them. Most of the dreams sites I have been able to discover (five) were located across southern Africa, and three were located outside of Africa. It must be emphasised that I had never visited any of these sites prior to these dreams, and at all the sites that I have subsequently been able to locate following the dream, I have found, on discussion with local inhabitants, one or more of the same recurring themes. These include: reported sightings of large mystical snakes and/or mermaids or fish-tailed beings; rare instances of submersion or disappearance of certain individuals underwater for long periods of time after which they emerge with powerful abilities in divination; reports of occasional drowning or the death of individuals due to certain precautionary rules not being adhered to; the practice of ritual offerings to appease or appeal to the water divinities; and/or the existence of myths relating to such themes. I only saw these snake/mermaid creatures in my dreams, and not at the physical sites that I subsequently discovered, but the coincidence of finding the exact place shown in a dream (previously unknown to me) and the concurrence of reported sightings and/or related myths, have prompted me to take such reports seriously.

I have already discussed one of these dream experiences in another publication (Bernard 2008) where I recounted how I was led, through a series of dreams, to a pool in the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal reputed by local inhabitants to be the abode of the Zulu princess of heaven, *Inkosazana*, sometimes referred to as *Nomkhubulwana* (who some claim can manifest as a mermaid); in this present chapter I will draw on another of those experiences located over 1,000 kilometres from the site mentioned above, to a remote river pool on the Doring River in the northwest region of the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The fact that I had never been in this area, nor had a family history associated with it, and the fact that this territory is occupied by Khoesan¹ descendants, and way beyond the reaches of my Zulu teacher's realm, is pertinent. The accuracy of

this dream, which I return to later in the chapter, concurred with many of the elements that I subsequently discovered at the site and has further challenged my rational understanding of claims of snake and mermaid sightings. In line with the emphasis of the turn to ontology in anthropology more generally (e.g. Kohn 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2015), I argue that we need to consider more broadly what constitutes evidence when dealing with phenomena that require one to move beyond the ‘finite provinces of meaning’ that constitute the order of reality in which scientific verification is currently located (Schutz 1974).

Transcending orders of reality and Schutz’s phenomenological conundrum

The anthropology of extraordinary experience (AEE) is primarily a methodological approach which advocates that when an anthropologist is seeking to explore phenomena or claims that go beyond our ‘normal’, ‘rational’ (‘Western scientific’) understanding of reality, especially those relating to altered states of consciousness (which include dreams, trance states and visions), we should suspend our disbelief and allow ourselves to experience such claimed phenomena from the inside. The AEE approach, which advocated the inclusion of such extra-ordinary experiences as valid data, was first articulated in a publication edited by Young and Goulet (1994) entitled *Being Changed by Cross-cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, and this was followed by a sequel edited by Goulet and Miller (2007) entitled *Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the Field*. Drawing from their own experiences they note that when ethnographers have extraordinary experiences in the field, these ‘challenge one’s conception of reality in the sense that normal ways of classifying perceptual data are no longer adequate and the boundary between the real and imaginary are blurred’ (Young and Goulet 1994: 8). Emphasising the value in gaining an insider perspective of extraordinary experiences, Young and Goulet argue that ‘anthropologists should, at a minimum, temporarily suspend disbelief, and attempt to take as seriously as possible informants’ reports of extraordinary experiences, as well as their explanations for them’ (1994: 11). The proponents advocated that in order to gain better insights into various realms of spiritual or metaphysical knowledge, the ethnographer should become actively involved, through ‘radical participation’, or more specifically ‘radical embodied participation’, in the ritual life of his or her host society. Rituals can be the best means of ‘radical embodied participation’ through which altered states of consciousness, including powerful dreams and visions, are induced.

The concept of ‘radical participation’ that was used by Goulet and Miller (2007), was adapted from Fabian’s concept of ‘ecstatic anthropology’ (2001: 31), which advocates that anthropologists set aside their ‘single minded pursuit of data within a clearly defined research agenda’ (Goulet and Miller 2007: 1) and

allow themselves to become *co-actors* in their informants' worlds. It thus goes beyond our mere observing, questioning and listening, to actively participating and 'joining in' with their lives. The proponents of this approach also insist that, as anthropologists, we cannot set aside those experiences 'that challenge our own epistemological, ontological, and ethical assumptions' (Goulet and Miller 2007: 2). They clarify this statement by referring to Fabian's concept of ecstatic fieldwork, which offers the potential for anthropologists to 'step outside one's taken-for-granted body of knowledge' (Goulet and Miller 2007: 5). Allowing one's world view to become transformed in the process is a distinct aspect of such an approach and to 'include such moments (of transformation) in one's ethnographic account is to present not only knowledge obtained but also the processes through which such knowledge was gained and the circumstances in which such processes became operative' (Goulet and Miller 2007: 6). Michael Jackson (1989) has used the concept of 'radical empiricism' to argue much the same point. Jackson drew his insights from William James (1976), a philosopher who coined the term 'radical empiricism'. Radical empiricism was, first and foremost, 'a philosophy of the experience of objects and actions in which the subject itself is a participant' (Jackson 1989: 3, citing from Edie 1965: 119). The selection of the term 'radical empiricism' was employed to directly counter the existing concept of 'traditional empiricism'. The latter 'assumes that the knower and the known inhabit disconnected worlds and regards experience as something passively received rather than actively made, something that impresses itself upon our blank minds or overcomes us like sleep' (Jackson 1989: 5). Thus, radical empiricism breaks down the boundary between the observer and the observed. Radical participation, as a methodological concept (Goulet and Miller 2007) could be seen as an element of this notion of radical empiricism.

I argue that the present reification of scientific validation of phenomena or claimed sightings of cryptids, in order for them to be considered 'real', is problematic. Phenomenologist Alfred Schutz argued that experiences that take place in different 'orders of reality' such as in altered states of consciousness, as in dreams and in trance, are governed by 'finite provinces of meaning' that are applicable only to the order of reality in which they are experienced and understood. According to Schutz, these orders of reality (such as the everyday life-world, the world of dreams, the world of science or the world of religious experience) each have their own meaning-compatible experiences, or cognitive styles (Schutz 1974). Schutz argued that one cannot merge the cognitive styles of the different provinces of meaning but that one should rather 'leap' across them. However, there is a residue (what Schutz referred to as an 'enclave') left behind from an experience gained in one order of reality (such as a dream) that bears relation to another (our everyday life-world). In the case of a dream experience we can only measure its truth or falsity within the cognitive style of a particular order of reality from which we are examining it (Schutz 1974: 127); as scientific knowledge does not derive from the order of reality in which

dreams or trance states emerge, it cannot be used as a valid measure of their experience. If Schutz's position is correct, this makes any 'scientific verification' of the claimed reality of dream-based experiences impossible, unless science is able to develop conceptual tools that are compatible with the order of reality that governs dreams. While not precluding the value of including such experiences as valid data in ethnographic accounts, or subjecting them to psychoanalysis, this phenomenological principle poses a problem if one is trying to make 'scientifically valid' claims for experiences or beliefs that are derived from dreams or during other altered states of consciousness.

While these arguments and the conundrums they pose are pertinent to experiences relating to the dream world or trance states (as 'altered states of consciousness' or ASCs), the phenomena I deal with in this paper include claims of ASC experiences, but they also transcend them to include claims of physically tangible encounters with snake and/or mermaid beings in geographical habitats that challenge our concepts of time and space. There is often a meaningful enclave or residue that binds these different experiences together, and this convergence of spatio-temporal dimensions across different orders of reality is an important aspect of extraordinary experience. The order and timing in which events occur (be they of dreams, encounters with people and/or animals, rituals, messages, etc.), and the convergence of otherwise disparate events, can transform an ordinary 'random' event into one of great significance and can have an effect of heightening the intensity of the experience. Goulet and Miller (2007) observed this spatio-temporal aspect of extraordinary experience in their review of contributors' papers in their edited volume. This tendency towards 'a sort of non-linear, non-Newtonian, quantum physical world in which related, connected events unfolded [or appeared to unfold] simultaneously in various locations' (Goulet and Miller 2007: 4) is sometimes referred to as 'synchronicity' (Jung et al. 1964; Mansfield 1995). Mansfield (1995), a physicist, has sought to explain the phenomenon of synchronicity with a combination of Jungian psychology and the insights of quantum physics. He defines synchronistic experiences as 'numinous events where the outside world meaningfully relates to our inner psychological states' (1995: 6). Jung's understanding of synchronicity differs slightly however in that he defines it as 'a "meaningful coincidence" of outer and inner events that are *not themselves causally connected*' (Jung et al. 1964: 211, emphasis added). For believers in the metaphysical power of these beings, as found in southern Africa, this definition of Jung's could be problematic in that they would see the coincidence of dreams, events, and encounters across different orders of reality, as well as the disturbance of our normal understandings of the boundaries of time and space, as having intimate causal relations. In the next section I examine how encounters with snake and fish-tailed beings are understood by diviner-healers in southern Africa, and these include the different orders of reality in which they are believed to manifest and transcend.

Water snake and mermaid encounters in southern Africa

Knowledge and beliefs regarding shape-shifting water serpents and mermaids are deep-seated and extensive among many southern African diviner-healers who frequently report encounters with such creatures in both their everyday life-worlds or in altered states of consciousness, such as in dreams or trance states (see Bernard 2010 for extensive comparative research of these beliefs across southern Africa). Far from being anecdotal, these claims are buttressed by a complex system of ideas and ritual practices regarding them. Reports of such beliefs have been documented from the time serious ethnographical enquiry was launched in southern Africa in the early to mid-1800s, largely by missionaries and ethnographers such as Callaway (1970), Soga (1931), Bryant (1949), and more recently Berglund (1976). The longevity and complexity of these ideas and the knowledge and rules regarding the ways humans should act towards these water creatures and the natural resources they inhabit and control, makes the common argument that these ideas originate from European representations of these entities (Drewal 2008) unlikely.

In southern Africa these water snake and mermaid cryptids are seen as working alongside human ancestral spirits (which are also believed to manifest as snakes, birds or other animals) to provide certain chosen individuals with insight into past, present and future events and in providing skills of healing (the role of diviner-healers). Explanations of the role and function of these fish-tailed and snake beings bear all the hallmarks of divinity, in that they are seen as the forebears of humanity (if not life), the source of water, rain, fertility, and the guardians of morality. Claimed experiences of them range from significant actual encounters with normal sized or giant light-emitting snakes and/or fish-tailed beings at water sources or remote natural sites (mountains, forests), to dreams, or to the ultimate of all experiences, the physical submersion of a individual 'called' underwater for varying periods of time (from a few hours to months or even years). The successful return of the submerged individual is dependent on the correct actions and behaviour of their kin members, who must not cry or grieve at the disappearance or apparent drowning of their family member but must wait patiently for signs of the submerged individual's return. They are usually required to offer a goat or cow as a sacrificial exchange for the life of the victim, who will then re-emerge, bestowed with powerful divinatory abilities and knowledge of healing and/or medicines. Individuals who undergo such submersion and return to tell the tale often report that they were confronted with a giant snake, a fish-tailed woman, multiple other snakes or creatures, and their own deceased kin (ancestral spirits) who occupy an idyllic dry world beyond the water realm.

These divinities are believed to traverse the boundaries of reality from the everyday life world and its physical elements (especially water) to the world of spirit (be it the underworld or heavenly realms). They are thus viewed as being physically tangible but have the magical ability to make themselves invisible and cross the boundary into spirit. They allegedly have shape-shifting and

transformative abilities, with the snake being described as able to emit an electrical force-field, often in the form of a bright light emanating from its eyes or a crystal stone on its forehead, which can trap the gaze of a person and put them into a trance before taking them to the underwater world.

The snake is believed to be able to change its form, as well as its size and length, sometimes concealing its head or tail, and some claim it emits a rustling sound when encountered. Some informants claim that the snake transforms into a mermaid and vice versa, to the extent that they are sometimes seen as one and the same, while others claim that the snake/mermaid duo are the gendered aspects of God (an androgynous God). For some Zulu informants who claim to have encountered the snake in its underwater realm, they explain that this is how the sky God *Inkosi yamakhosi omkhulu* ('the lord of lords') manifests, and the mermaid is none other than his daughter, the heavenly princess/goddess *Inkosazana* (or *Nomkhubulwana*), who some see as the source of life, water and fertility (Berglund 1976; Bryant 1949; Kendall 1999). It is asserted that *Inkosazana* can transform into a tree, a plant, a small animal, a snake, a beautiful young woman, an old hag, light rain/mist or a rainbow.

Rather than viewing the mermaids as a singular goddess, the Xhosa and Shona speakers regard them as a group of powerful semi-daemons (referred to as the *abantu bomlambo*, or 'people of the river' by the Xhosa, and *njuzu* by the Shona) whose role in the generation of water, fertility and healing is much akin to the Zulu ideas of *Inkosazana/Nomkhubulwana*. Ideas of the water snake and the *watermeid* ('mermaid') are also extensive across the southern Cape region amongst the original inhabitants, the Khoesan peoples and their descendants. Numerous claims of sightings and encounters with the snake and the *watermeid* emanate from these areas (Hoff 1997; 2007), and are frequently reported in the popular press. I have argued (Bernard 2010) that beliefs and practices regarding these water divinities held by the Nguni-speaking peoples (Xhosa, Zulu and Swazi) could well have been shared with, or possibly originated from, the Khoesan (San and Khoekhoe) peoples with whom they intermarried and co-existed along the eastern seaboard of South Africa.

Reported sightings of the mermaid, usually as a female entity, reveal remarkably similar descriptions across southern Africa (from Zimbabwe and across the whole of South Africa) in that she is described as having fair skin (European-like – see also Schmidt, this volume), long (wet) dark hair and, some report, green/blue eyes. Dreams are one of the main ways in which these divinities are believed to communicate with the living, often calling individuals to certain pools or water bodies where they are reported to live. For diviner-healers who receive such dreams it is important for them to try and locate these pools (clues to their location being given in the dream), where they must visit and 'show' themselves by giving offerings of sorghum beer, beads, tobacco and on occasion small stock (such as chickens or goats). These mermaid/snake divinities are associated with certain undisturbed pools and fountains, but it is believed they can move across the landscape in the form of winds (including tornadoes) mist and rain.

While both the snake and mermaid are essentially positive in their creative and moral force, they can be exceedingly destructive when offended or angered and are believed to seek revenge for bad human behaviours (for social and environmental reasons) by inflicting them with extreme weather events. Among the Khoesan descendants it is also believed that certain individuals are able to trick the snake, or placate it with herbal medicines, in order that they may remove the powerful crystal stone from its forehead (Hoff 1997; 2007) to use for healing or luck. Among the Nguni-speakers there is also widespread belief that certain magicians (herbalists) are able to mystically trap these beings through obtaining part of their flesh and using contagious magic to compel them to enter into an individual exchange pact whereby they, or their clients, can gain rapid and enormous wealth (Bernard 2010), usually in exchange for the life of a close kin member. Such ideas, now rife in the context of the disruptions caused by neo-liberal economics, support the claim that these beings can be physically tangible (cf. High, this volume). However, discourses regarding the magical manipulation of these creatures reveal that such activities are not only morally suspect but also highly risky, as these divinities have consciousness and agency that exceeds that of humans and they can punish evil doers with death. The physical tangibility of the fish-tailed beings is also evident in the claims by certain communities that occasionally misguided individuals have been responsible for shooting and killing a mermaid, actions which have resulted in devastating floods with multiple casualties (Bernard 2010; Pienaar 2009).

Apart from these rare occasions it is generally believed that if the water divinities choose not to be seen they will not reveal themselves and this is especially the case if a person's motives are insincere or morally suspect (Bernard 2008). It is believed that such people run the risk of being killed if they trespass too near to the divinities' watery abodes. It is for this reason that most encounters happen to young children (who are seen to be less tainted by bad deeds or intentions) or diviner-healers. It is also believed among the Zulu that certain kings or chiefs may commune with them.

The seriousness with which local indigenous populations on the southeastern seaboard of South Africa take alleged sightings of these water divinities was demonstrated in two alleged hoaxes in the 1990s. In 1996 in Oudsthoorn, in the Little Karoo, South Africa, the CP Nel Museum reported it had captured a mermaid (referred to as the *watermeid* by local coloured or Khoe descendants) which it was holding in a water tank. This alleged discovery of a beached mermaid coincided with a time of severe flooding in the region and led to a deluge of enquiries and visitors, with some people travelling hundreds of kilometres to see this captured creature with their own eyes. When the museum claimed it had released the mermaid into a nearby river and had installed a mannequin mermaid in the tank instead, there was great dissatisfaction. A similar response was elicited when the *Daily Dispatch*, a local newspaper serving the East London area of the Eastern Cape, published a report on 1 January 1998 claiming that a stranded mermaid had been rescued from the beach and

relocated to the city's oceanarium where it could be viewed by the public (for a fee); when it became apparent that the 'mermaid' was a publicity stunt the angry crowds who had travelled long distances became very upset, demanding refunds for their travel costs (Morrow and Vokwana 2003).

While both claims turned out to be hoaxes, it was the flood of interest and strong emotional reactions that they generated that is of interest. Indeed, the popular press frequently carries such stories of mermaid sightings in South Africa, and many of these seem to come from the Khoesan associated territories of the Little Karoo. An example of such a story comes from an article published in the *Sunday Times* (24 November 2002) by journalists Caspar Greeff and Ruben Boschoff, who recounted their findings when they went to the Baviaanskloof, a wilderness area in the Eastern Cape. They tell of their meeting with an old medicine man, Oom Klaas, who had reported sightings of mermaids. He told them that many people living in the area had seen them, and claimed:

'I saw the mermaids twice. The first time was years ago, in a pool near here. She had pitch black – long hair – and pure white skin and breasts like a woman. The bottom half of her body was in the water. She was combing her hair with a black comb, and when she saw me, she went underwater and disappeared. As she went under her hair spread out on top of the water. It was beautiful. I saw another mermaid two years ago in the same pool. Her breasts were bigger, she looked like she had had a baby, but she was very beautiful. She looked at me – she had grey-green eyes – then she also disappeared under the water.' Oom Klaas had been warned about the mermaids by his father, also a herbalist and medicine-man [...] 'My father saw many mermaids. One Sunday he went to the pool and sat on the rocks and they took him down to where they live under the water, and taught him about herbs. They live in houses like we do, only under water [...] Sometimes they will pull a child under the water. If that happens to your child, you mustn't cry and carry on, because then they will kill the child and throw her out (of the water). No, you must get a cow, and slaughter it next to the river, and cook it. Then send down the haunches. When you go home your child will come back.'

(Greeff and Boschoff 2002)

This report, which bears all the typical themes of the water divinities found elsewhere in the country, came from a remote area on the east coast of South Africa's southernmost regions. I was to discover similar ideas near the west coast, some 600 kilometres away.

Challenging boundaries – mermaid dreams and an anthropologist's experience

The forty degree Celsius February heat was pulsating through my body and across the landscape to the shimmering blue water of the Doring River, with

its pools encased with tall reeds and mirroring the looming sandstone cliffs along its edge. I was standing, overlooking the river valley, at the very farm-workers' cottages that I had seen in my dream, exactly as they had been aligned in a row along the base of a small mountain. I was having trouble distinguishing whether I was still in my dream state or in my normal ordinary reality. The dryness of the landscape and sparse Karoo vegetation was exactly as I had sensed in my dream, as was the river. I was standing listening to Joy, my Afrikaans-speaking colleague who had kindly agreed to travel this long distance with me to interview some of the local people in their language regarding the possible significance of me being shown this place in a dream. Joy was deep in conversation with a middle-aged man, Jacob (pseudonym), and his wife about some of the local stories regarding strange encounters with cryptozoological water beings in the area. I had discovered this dream site a month earlier, but before I continue, more explanation is needed regarding my dream and how I came to find this site.

The dream, which I had in February 2004, was as follows:

In the dream I was seated in the front of a truck with my sister and brother and we were driving along a dirt road. I was very clearly shown the type of vegetation, which was typical Karoo veld, with its short tufts of wheat coloured grass and small scrubby shrubs and the general feeling of dryness of the soil. Suddenly we came to the edge of the plateau we were driving along and the beautiful vistas of distant hills and valleys opened out in the view before us. It felt like we were at the top of an escarpment or pass, and I remember coming to a screeching halt in the car because it felt like we were about to go over the edge, and I was relieved that I was able to stop in time. As we sat in awe of the beautiful view before us, I then saw that the road veered slightly to the right, as it dropped down into the valley. I felt it was safe to continue our journey and we started to descend slowly down the steep rocky track. On our left was a sheer drop and I drove carefully, hugging the right hand side of the road. In the distance I could see a large river meandering, but it did not seem to have much water in it. We then found ourselves in the valley and we had stopped at a small isolated farmhouse. I then found I was inside the house and was aware of the presence of its owners, who were a middle-aged white couple. I noticed in particular the man, as he sat in a chair in the corner of a dark room, and looked at me with a serious face. The next moment I felt I was outside again and had stepped straight into some deep water in a river. I was able to grab hold of a rope and swing myself across to the water's edge. I noticed the old man just sitting watching me, fairly unconcerned. I threw the rope to my sister and saw that my brother (who in real life is a keen ornithologist) was already on the other side of the river watching birds through his binoculars amongst thorn trees. I then found myself in the courtyard of the house and saw a woman standing next to a sculpture of a mermaid. I was aware she was

using it as an attraction for tourists to come and visit the area. Suddenly a woman with a mermaid tail went past me, her tail flapping the ground. As I looked up I saw a small distinctly shaped hill, not far from the river, rising up out of the valley against which was a group of about six to ten modestly sized houses. I asked the lady where I was and she told me 'You are on the road to XX'.² I awoke with the name reverberating in my mind.

Awaking from the dream, I immediately went to consult my South African atlas. I looked for the name of the place the lady told me in the index (I was not familiar with the name), and found a place of that name with the map reference. Turning to the correct page I discovered the place was on the Doring River, in the Western Cape, in a region north of the Cederberg Mountains. I noticed there were a number of passes and escarpments marked in the area and thought that I needed to follow-up on the dream and see if the place was anything like what I was shown. This was a region of South Africa I had never been to, but as I had heard about the beauty of the Cederberg Mountains, I decided to persuade my family to accompany me in search of my dream site during our Christmas vacation that year. I made a point of telling them my dream in great detail so they could be my witnesses should we find the place that fitted my description, and in early January the following year we took ourselves off for a camping trip to the Cederberg.

Accompanying me were my brother and sister who were with me in the dream, my sister's two sons, my two younger children and a couple of their friends. It was exactly as I described, in terms of the scenery, the pass, the river valley, the single farmhouse and the special shaped hill along which was grouped a number of small labourers' cottages. Unfortunately, not one of us in our party could speak Afrikaans, the local lingua franca, to find out if there were any stories relating to mermaids in the area. All our efforts to communicate with the local 'coloured'³ people living in the area came to nought. I was reluctant to go and knock on the farmer's door, as I feared, quite rightly, he would think I was mad if I told him that I had been shown his house in a dream. I was happy enough to know that I had found what I regarded as the right place and my brother kindly accompanied me back to the river site at dawn the next day in order that I could do a small ritual. Before descending to the river we had stopped at the worker's cottages to ask a lady if it was alright to walk down to the river. Through gesticulations and smiles the lady, who lived at the end of the row of worker's cottages (that had appeared to me in my dream), indicated the best route down to the river where I was able to access a large pool surrounded with reeds.

It was this lady and her husband Jacob that Joy and I were now interviewing to find out if the area had any connection to water snakes and/or mermaids. The lady had remembered me, and when Joy had told them I had been shown this place in a dream, far from being surprised, they beamed with smiles and appeared to accept it as if such an event was normal. Jacob then began to recount his own experience with what he referred to as the

waterbaas ('boss/lord of the water'), which bore many of the recurring themes I had encountered across southern Africa. He explained to Joy that as children they had always been warned by the elders to avoid going close to the river because it was inhabited by a large water snake with a diamond on its forehead that would suck them down to the watery depths. He remembered that they often saw a white light near the river at night, often accompanied by the sound of cattle lowing, which was confirmation that the snake was active. He was told a person could steal the light if they were clever, but if the snake knew of your intentions then a sudden wind would come up and one had to be very strong to withstand it.

He then explained a more recent incident he had experienced as an adult, which made him take such warnings seriously. One of his responsibilities on the farm was to manage the water pump which was located on the bank of the river, near to the bridge. One day he had gone down to check the pump and as he approached it he saw a very large 'fish' lying on the sand bank. It was so big he thought he should hurry back to his car to get his gun so he could shoot it. As he returned from the car, gun in hand, the fish dived into the water (rather than slid) and at the same time an extremely strong wind (like a whirlwind) suddenly picked up on the side of the bridge where he was standing. The thick reed beds on the river's edge were flattened by the wind, but he noticed that on the other side of the bridge there was no wind at all. When he got to the pump he discovered that the wind had wrecked it and all the bearings and seals were broken. He described how this *waterbaas* was not a typical fish with a pointed face but had a flattish face. He apologised to us that this was his only experience with a water creature, but that we should seek out an old shepherd who lived upstream of them who had many stories regarding local lore. He suggested we should first stop off at the white farmer's house to ask for directions.

Encouraged by Jacob assuring us that the white farmer was a kind man and would be quite tolerant of such enquiries, we then drove to the house and knocked on the door. A middle-aged man, who bore striking resemblance to the man I had seen in my dream, answered the door and on hearing about our research interests invited us in (we did not divulge my dream to him nor mention it). As we sat in his small darkened lounge I had the same sense of déjà vu sweep over me; it was exactly like being in my dream. As he sat across from us he agreed that stories of mermaids and large mystical water snake sightings were indeed common to the area and he had heard them since he was a child. Then, in what could be construed as a perfectly rational scientific argument, he started to explain to us how a creature such as a mermaid (which he also referred to as *waterbaas*) could exist. In his opinion it was quite possible that when a mature human male was swimming in the river, he could ejaculate sperm in the water and that these sperm could fuse with any fish eggs that may be in the vicinity, resulting in offspring that were half-human and half-fish. It was evident that he had spent some time considering how one could credibly account, in 'scientific' terms, for the existence of such a perplexing creature.

After some time discussing the subject he agreed that we should interview Oupa ('grandfather'), the old shepherd (a Khoe descendent) who lived on the farm upstream. He consented to drive us to meet Oupa and introduce us to him. Initially Oupa was reluctant to divulge any information, despite his wife's obvious excitement at our presence and our topic of interest. It was when Joy mentioned to him that I had the dream that led me to this place that a smile beamed across his face and he started to open up. Like Jacob, he began by telling us that, as a child, he had always been warned not to go near the river because a large snake lived there. He was warned that if the snake caught him he would be taken under water to its 'room' (implying a dry space where it lived). The snake would normally only be seen at night (living in its room underwater during the day). His wife interjected saying that sometimes during the day, when their normally drought stricken land was about to receive good rains, the light of the snake would be seen on the mountain, much like the sun shines off a mirror. The appearance of the water snake in this manner was a forewarning that rain was coming.

Oupa then started to recount his own experience with the snake, which he also referred to as the *waterbaas*. He pointed downstream towards the pool in the distance, the very pool that I had visited a month earlier with my brother to do the ritual offering, and explained how one night he had been walking home along the edge of the river when he had observed light moving around as if someone was walking with a bright torch. However, the light was coming from the semi-submerged reeds in the water. He suspected that it might have been the water snake feeding, and as he came closer the light disappeared. Taking as wide a berth as possible he returned home, and the next morning he went down to the pool to investigate. He described how he found a *pol*, describing this as a circle of reeds with water in the middle (suggesting he had not seen it previously). When he looked inside the *pol*, he saw a deep hole in the midst of which stood a *willerhout* ('willow tree'). For some reason this tree made him very fearful and he beat a hasty retreat. As he was recounting this story his young daughter came outside to join us, and on hearing about our interests, agreed that she knew a number of people who had reported seeing a *watermeid* ('mermaid') when crossing the bridge over the river.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn on Schutz's phenomenological conundrum to explain the limitations of science in its current format in validating certain types of experience that straddle different orders of reality. I have focused in particular on the widespread claims across southern Africa of encounters with mystical shape-shifting water snake and mermaid divinities. Seeking explanations for these alleged experiences within particular orders of reality, such as in dreams, or in encounters in the everyday life-world, or during the underwater submersion trance state, could be rationalised through a number of different social and psychological explanations, such as those offered by Jung.

However, it is the synchronistic connectivity between these different states and the convergence of experiences across a wide spatio-temporal dimension that poses the greatest challenge to these more positivist and reductionist explanations. Beyond Schutz's phenomenological conundrum, a major problem with validating a dream, as with any other form of ASC, is that it is an intensely private experience that cannot be shared in the same form by others. It also suffers the risk of only being partially recalled by the individual dreamer, and may be subjected to some distortion on recall due to memory loss or auto-suggestion. Strategies used by diviner-healers to minimise such distortion or memory loss include enhancement of dreams through ritual plant ingestion (dream incubation), dancing and sleep disruption, and even undergoing physical deprivation. Adopting the practice of dream sharing, preferably with a number of unbiased and independent observers, assists in validating the experience, especially if the dream is recounted in detail and it turns out to be accurately predictive in those details. The verification of those details by independent observers located at the dream site further helps to validate the accuracy of the dream, as was the case with the example I have presented in this chapter.

I have drawn on my own experiences derived from a radical participation approach to demonstrate its potential value in providing a form of experiential verification that would not normally be considered as valid in conventional science. The convergence of my dream and its many component elements with what I encountered at the Doring River is just one example of a number that I have had in the last fifteen years. The fact that the essential elements of the snake/mermaid 'mythology' coincided with those that I have discovered across a diversity of groups in the southern African region adds further credence to these claims. The profound experiences I have had have challenged my own scientifically informed understanding of reality, temporality and causality, to the point that they have deepened the mystery of these cryptozoological beings. I believe that this is where their power lies and why they have such a profound and pervasive effect on the beliefs and practices of many southern African peoples.

In anthropology we have realised that there are certain forms of knowledge and claims of experience that are not amenable to scientific testing and verification in that they confound the basic principles on which science is currently based. Trying to prove the truth or falsity of such claims may be a futile exercise. Beyond needing to interrogate why we insist that science is the only acceptable paradigm to validate sightings of cryptids in order for them to be considered real, we also need to consider whether such mysteries should be solved, or whether they should remain elusive and beyond the control of humans in this world (see also King, this volume).

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Notes

- 1 The Khoesan (sometimes spelt Khoisan) are comprised of the San (or Bushmen) hunter-gatherers, the recognised autochthons of the southern African region, and the closely related Khoekhoe (also spelt Khoikhoi), who were cattle and sheep herders at the time of European colonisation from the 1600s, and who were predominantly located in what is now referred to as the Western Cape. The latter were referred to [pejoratively] as Hottentots by the early European immigrants, and have experienced severe acculturation as a result of colonisation.
- 2 I prefer not to give the name to protect the area from those who may try to track such sites down.
- 3 The notion of 'coloured' people can be traced back to the apartheid years during which people were classified on the basis of their skin colour. In reality this was a diverse group of largely 'mixed blood' people, many of whom could trace their ancestry to Khoisan forbears (Marais 1962). It is not a pejorative term in contemporary usage, having been appropriated from the colonisers by people of Khoisan descent.

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